

## Phantom Frames

*Matthew Turner*

Although photography is often an adjunct to literature, there is still, on first appearances, a clear distinction between the two mediums. Photography has a clear, seemingly objective, frame that it superimposes on the world, and literature is fluid in how it captures people, events and spaces. However, writing does have a frame too, a phantom frame, one that is more amorphous than the absolute rectangles of photography. The lens through which we read a story is akin to the geometry of a light's beam emanating from a torch in a pitch-black room, the radius of its illuminating ray changing dependant upon the distance of objects from its source. Before opening a book the scene is laid out in complete darkness until the writer shines curleques of light onto it. The writer holds a torch and the story unfolds as the cone of light—or pen and paper—trespasses on new events, objects and people. We think we are seeing or imagining everything, and the frame of light does expand, but many things are still left in dense shadow—slightly out of shot.

Considering this, it is perhaps not so unusual that Kevin Breathnach's debut novel, *Tunnel Vision*, appears to take just as much influence from photographic techniques as literature. It's been said the book is about 'lines' but its real preoccupation is carving out, in three-dimensions, the passive aggression and trauma inherent in various framing methods; a selfie taken as a rebuke to Man Ray by his assistant, Bernice Abbott; the vertigo inducing and fast forced perspectives of railway tunnels on an imagined seven-hour journey through Norway—an early emanation of where the book finishes;

the anxious, serene order of balls within the border of a billiards table; the way drugs crop and edit a person's reality and redacted images of André Kertész's obsessively cut and cropped selfie with his wife.

The book is comprised of essayistic digressions interspersed with autobiographical travelogues of post-university life in Paris, Korea, Munich, and Madrid. Sometimes charting encounters with friends and the narrator's relationship with his girlfriend—a thinly veiled portrait of the Breathnach himself. While the two forms of writing appear detached at first, the frames or filters described in the essays become fleeting apertures through which the fiction is read, creating a unique fusion in the refractions between the two. The essayistic sections are not hanging fragments but are reflections on the autobiographical writing, showing the reader the lens through which they should read going forward. More so than not, the frame—elevated from subject to dramatic device—that captures the text, conveys the psychological tumults of the narrator better than the writing itself. Leaving the reader aware of the amorphous frame that writing often contains yet has an illusive edge, only momentarily scratched into dust. *Tunnel Vision* has a tumult of phantom frames that stalk the sinuous narrative in the same way as the squares of an Instagram feed track a person's life.

Photographic and filmic frames look innocent in their seemingly objective composition of the moments we want to hold onto. Look again, however, and the same inculpability contains a subtle cruelty. Take the surrealist theory of montage for example, the heavy reliance on the

spark ignited—the frisson—between two opposing images or shots grew from André Breton’s ‘revulsion,’ as David Sylvester describes in his essay on the subject, of same-sex relationships. For him and the surrealists, only the interplay of opposites was the source of all that was good. What appeared like a revolutionary new way of capturing experience, had a sinister ideology below the surface. When Breathnach does approach the subject of photography in a more direct way he tackles such problems by reframing their female subjects to activate and release them from the objectification of the lens, from its passive aggression. This occurs most memorably in a chapter entitled ‘[Closer Still]’ which tracks the history of selfies André Kertész took with his partner Elizabeth. Breathnach describes the editing techniques used by the photographer on various iterations of the photographs throughout the couple’s life together. While the cropping and trimming seems purely artistic and compositional at first, it quickly takes on a violence that mimics the pair’s deteriorating relationship. Transforming, as Breathnach writes, from ‘she entrusts photography with one of the most infectious expressions of happiness I know’ to ‘she seems to recoil from the camera’s gaze’ and finally ‘over the course of two croppings, Kertész will slice right through his wife’s arms and chest, her shoulder, throat and face.’ The result is evidence of a truly oppressive gaze, one which Breathnach counteracts by lifting Elizabeth from the flatness of the photo through telling her story.

This chapter is then the optic through which the next, ‘[Veronica]’, is read. It recounts the narrator and his partner Collette’s time spent in Munich, and, much like the

photographs in the previous chapter, while everything may seem banally OK on the surface, something is disturbed below. And by the end they are becoming increasingly distant, as the narrator disappears again through the arches of a tunnel, like photographs facing each other rather than people.

The interaction between these two frames or chapters, and comparable instances occur throughout the book, are similar to image and film-based techniques of montage, where two contrasting images are placed next to each other in the hope of some ‘frission,’ or ‘third image,’ occurring in the unspecified gap between. However, being textual, it’s a different species of montage. It brings to mind instead the title of Ian White’s posthumous retrospective at The Camden Arts Centre: ‘Any frame is a thrown voice.’ And this phantom frame which coalesces between and over the two types of writing is another narrator. A thrown voice: you’re not sure where it comes from, but you know it’s there. In *Tunnel Vision* these interactions do conjure a third frame or thrown voice, but the gap between essay ([‘Closer Still’]) and fiction ([‘Veronica’]) is also the point where an alternate type of realism emerges. After all, when recollecting, not everything can be written or said explicitly; some things are left lingering, echoing and vibrating in the background and their exact point of emanation is left buried.

In the latter stages of the novel, as the protagonist’s mental state begins to crumble, there is an exquisite section on Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina*. If, as Breathnach describes, *Malina* is ‘an observation machine’ then, in a typically self-reflective fashion, *Tunnel Vision* itself is, as

we have seen, a framing machine. Yet these frames are not always complete, and in this chapter they begin to break in synch with the narrators well being—becoming more like the fitful edge of literature rather than photography. Both Bachmann and the lead character in her novel, although not photographed, are still cast as trapped in the deformed structural parameters of patriarchal society. On the last page of this chapter Breathnach describes that in *Malina* ‘the first-person narrative is regularly interrupted by less orthodox modes of literary speech...in which the person addressed is not the reader exclusively.’ The frame then, that usually orders the reciprocal relationship between writer and reader is splintered and bleeding outwards – the writer is framing someone else we can’t see. This seeps through into the next chapter ‘[Death Cycles],’ which resonates with Ingeborg Bachmann’s unfinished prose cycle ‘Ways of Death’ to ensure a transplant or montage of meaning. The narrator immediately starts soliloquising to someone who is not the reader ‘Now you and I were breaking up, I was preparing to leave the city.’ After all the claustrophobia educing frames we are now finally and tragically faced with one that is radically open, and this is just as traumatic; potentially infinite like Facebook’s ever expanding and encroaching angle of view that is not confined to the edges of our photos.

To complete the turbulent modulations there is then a slow flattening in the latter pages of the novel during a discussion of the shallow nature of the American landscape using a photo series aptly named ‘American Surfaces’—a feeling once again mirrored in the narrator himself as he detaches, becomes depressed and neutralised by the

environment around him. The border of the page starts to move inwards, gradually squeezing the text into a thin column and then into a single plane, as he ruminates on the limited avenues left in his roving self-imposed exile from Ireland and ‘reality.’ Because as much as we like to associate photography with happy memories, when a person starts to see the world with the sterile flatness of a photo, with its annexing of events and emotions, they are already deep within a dark and troubling tunnel. Images also have something to do with crowds; an image is a crowd in a way, a smear of impressions and relationships. They also tend to draw people together and create mass identity. But, when we are often solitary in their contemplation, as is the case in *Tunnel Vision*—alone in a crowd of illusionary possible connections—this only intensifies the isolation they induce.

In utilising the frame as a literary device *Tunnel Vision* takes the polyvocality of imagery, the dominant tenor of the time the reader and narrator live in, and splices it into literature to create a forest of phantom frames, a phantom narrator, to speak for the disquiet of those stuck in the inertia of information saturation: a communion from a chaotic place where any meaningful communication seems impossible.

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KEVIN BREATHNACH's essay, *Various Assumptions: The Still Lives of the Artists*, was published in *gorse* no. 1, and an essay on William Gass' *On Being Blue* in *gorse* on-line.

GORSE is a twice-yearly print journal—and occasional website—edited and published in Dublin: [gorse.ie](http://gorse.ie)